

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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### **City of Tulare Prepares for Switch to District-Based Election System**

(March 22, 2011, TULARE, CA)—The City of Tulare will begin preparations to move away from at-large elections to district-based voting systems in time for the November 2012 elections. The shift comes after the city reached a settlement on March 21<sup>st</sup> with Tulare residents seeking a more equitable voting system.

On August 25, 2010, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area (Lawyers' Committee), along with voting rights attorney Joaquin G. Avila and a *pro bono* team at Reed Smith LLP, filed a lawsuit on behalf of Latino voters against the City of Tulare under the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA). The CVRA provides a method for minority communities to challenge at-large elections when the majority's electoral choices are characterized by racially polarized voting. Creating districts within at-large voting areas can remedy this issue.

"Through this settlement, the City of Tulare has recognized the importance of creating a district system that ensures full and fair political empowerment of the Latino community. Until now, Latinos have been locked out of the political process," stated Robert Rubin, founding director of the Lawyers' Committee's California Voting Rights Institute.

The settlement outlines that the switch to district elections will be presented to voters in the June 2012 election. Pending voter approval, the city of Tulare will be prepared to convert the current at-large system to a district-based electoral system by the following election in November 2012. The ruling in Tulare is the fifth settlement reached by the Lawyers' Committee through legal action under the CVRA.

“This settlement represents a significant advance for minority access to the political process by providing the opportunity for replacing a discriminatory at-large election system with a system of district elections,” said Avila. “As we start 2011, the California Voting Rights Act is helping to make Latino political empowerment in many California communities, a reality.”

Grace Calderon, one of the plaintiffs in the case, had been working on remedying Tulare’s at-large election system since 1994, before connecting with Reed Smith, Avila, and Rubin in 2010. “We didn’t know how to go about it at that time,” Calderon said. “We didn’t have counsel. This gives us a voice in our government, and that is all we ask for: to come to the table and be heard.”

“Given the clear evidence that Tulare’s at-large system was undermining the right to vote for a large segment of its community, we were pleased to helping to enact a fair and equitable change for all,” said Reed Smith partner James Wood, who, along with his colleagues Ray Cardozo, Tom Quinlan, Sergio Garcia, Khurshid Khoja, and Jonathan Marker, joined Lawyers’ Committee in serving as *pro bono* co-counsel for the suit.

#### **About the Lawyers' Committee:**

For more than 40 years, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area has worked to advance, protect and promote the legal rights of communities of color, immigrants and refugees -- with a specific focus on low-income communities and a long-standing commitment to African Americans. Lawyers' Committee staff, working with hundreds of *pro bono* attorneys, provides free legal assistance and representation to individuals on civil legal matters through direct services, impact litigation and policy advocacy. Lawyers’ Committee officially launched the California Voting Rights Institute (CVRI) earlier this month. The Institute will build and expand upon Mr. Rubin’s successes in the voting rights field over the past 20 years. In addition to its litigation component, the CVRI will be authoring and commissioning scholarly articles that help to elucidate existing election law principles while encouraging the adoption of new and creative concepts.

For more information, visit [www.lccr.com](http://www.lccr.com).

#### **About Reed Smith:**

Reed Smith is a global relationship law firm with more than 1,600 lawyers in 22 offices throughout the United States, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Founded in 1877, the firm represents leading international businesses, from Fortune 100 corporations to mid-market and emerging enterprises. Its lawyers provide litigation and other dispute resolution services in multi-jurisdictional and other high-stakes matters; deliver regulatory counsel; and execute the full range of strategic domestic and cross-border transactions. Reed Smith is a preeminent advisor to industries including financial services, life sciences, health care, advertising, technology and media, shipping, energy trade and commodities, real estate, manufacturing, and education. For more information, visit [www.reedsmith.com](http://www.reedsmith.com).

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**About Joaquin G. Avila:**

Joaquin G. Avila is voting rights attorney. Mr. Avila has focused exclusively on voting rights issues and litigation in the Southwest. He has an extensive national voting rights background. In 1974, Mr. Avila joined the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (M.A.L.D.E.F.), a national Latino civil rights advocacy organization, where he devoted his career in litigation providing minority communities with access to the political process, serving as a staff attorney, director of organization's voting rights program, Regional Counsel in San Antonio, Texas and serving as President and General Counsel. In 1985, Mr. Avila established his private voting rights practice. Mr. Avila has successfully argued cases at the federal district court, appellate circuit, and U.S. Supreme Court levels. In 1996, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation selected Mr. Avila as a MacArthur Fellow for his work in the voting rights area. He is presently Executive Director of the National Voting Rights Advocacy Initiative and Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at Seattle University School of Law.

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